Help Us, Help Students: Supporting Advisors During COVID-19

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Abstract

"Self-care" has become a buzz-word in the last few years, but there is extensive research supporting the need for individuals to dedicate time to engage in activities designed to increase individual well-being and reduce stress and symptoms of burnout. Seventy-seven academic advisors at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) completed the "Help Us, Help Students" survey which examined advisors' work and self-care activities during the COVID-19 global pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, advisors took their roles to the virtual platform and experienced many benefits and challenges associated with working from home. Through this survey, researchers collected information about advisors' work-from-home experiences and analyzed the frequency and change of 13 self-care activities during three time periods in 2020: prior to, during, and just after the 100% remote work time period. Results indicated that advisors engaged in more self-care activities and that they engaged in those activities more frequently during the time they were working entirely from home as compared with when they were working on campus. Advisors also discussed their preferences and levels of comfort in returning to campus or requesting flexible work arrangements from their supervisors. This paper also considers limitations for future research.

Keywords

academic advising, well-being, advising practices, advisor self-care, working remotely

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Help Us, Help Students: Supporting Advisors During COVID-19

This paper presents findings from a survey developed by the Research and Assessment Committee of the Jaguar Academic Advising Association (JACADA) on the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) campus. In Fall 2019, the last regular semester before the global COVID-19 pandemic, IUPUI enrolled 19,098 undergraduate students, 8,286 at the graduate level. The first-time, full time undergraduate student class consisted of 3,674 students with 39.8% Pell eligible, 28.2% being first in their family to attend college, 8.9% Black/African American, and 13.6% Hispanic/Latino. Only 2% of undergraduates were enrolled in online programs (defined as 75% or more of instruction being carried out remotely). Academic advising at IUPUI is typically carried out by professional or primary role advisors and—prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—work-from-home arrangements for advisors were extremely rare. Though there is some central coordination of campus-wide advising initiatives, advisors report organizationally to directors or assistant/associate deans within academic units including degree-granting schools, university college, and the honors college.

To investigate the challenges, benefits, habits, and perceptions of academic advisors that were developing because of work-from-home conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the JACADA Research and Assessment Committee developed a mixed methods survey. The research team consisted of four full-time academic advisors across two units on campus, a Project Management Specialist with the University Transfer Office whose previous role was in academic advising, and the Senior Executive Director of Campus Career and Advising Services. All are members of JACADA and chose to participate on the Research and Assessment Committee for their own personal interest and professional development.

The mixed methods survey created by the Research and Assessment Committee members represents a cross-sectional, exploratory study of how work conditions contribute to levels of satisfaction in the work of academic advising. Specifically, the study explored these three research questions:

- What, if any, benefits and challenges did advisors experience during the 100% remote work time period related to their remote work environment, health issues, care-taking responsibilities, and basic needs?
- How did advisors' frequency of engagement in self-care activities change during the 100% remote work time period?
- What would advisors like to see with their work arrangements (schedule and location) in the future, given what they experienced in the 100% remote work time period?

The COVID-19 pandemic forced 91% of students in universities, colleges, and schools to continue their education online (Abumalloh et al., 2021). The entirety of IUPUI's student population was included in this effort to slow the spread of the disease. In a survey by the International Association of Universities, "almost 80% of respondents believe that COVID-19 will have an impact on the enrollment numbers for the new academic year" (Marinoni et al., 2020). This widespread shift to an online and work-from-home environment was unprecedented and its impact not yet researched.

Guiding our research questions, was the work of He et al. (2020) for assessing advisor beliefs, practices, and perceptions of well-being. They believe an, "advisors' self-evaluation of their beliefs, practices, and well-being is an integral part of the systematic assessment process of academic advising" (p. 1). Students expect "empathy, genuine care, and compassion" from their advisor(s) but academic advisors may begin to experience emotional, physical, and spiritual exhaustion from constantly witnessing and absorbing the difficulties of students" (Ali & Johns, 2018). The need for basic self-care is a "basic human element of well-being" and includes the "basic foundations of physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychological/emotional, social, familial, occupational, and financial well-being" (Goldberg, 2013). Further, research by Skovholt et al. (2001) focused on the importance of self-care for individuals in helping professions to prevent burnout. "Along with professional self-care, personal self-care is vital to professional stamina. Balancing the four personal dimensions of wellness—physical, spiritual, emotional,

and social—is paramount. Counselors need to be assertive about their wellness" (Skovholt et al., 2001, p. 174).

The JACADA Research and Assessment Committee analyzed the frequency and change of 13 self-care activities during three time periods in 2020 to see how habits have changed. In addition to contributing to the literature around advisors' experiences in the profession, this study resulted in a report to advising leaders and campus administration to help inform future decisions around flexible work arrangements that might be considered as part of post-pandemic campus operations.

Methods

The Methods section summarizes the researchers design of the survey instrument, data collection and analysis, and the participants. You will see data collection began in the fall 2020 semester, but the inception of this research study started in the summer of 2020. The analyses of data concluded in January 2021.

Survey Instrument

We designed an online survey using Qualtrics software and included five sections: (a) demographic and other participant information including age, gender, race, personality (extraversion), living arrangements, and job responsibilities, (b) challenges of working remotely, (c) benefits of working remotely, (d) engagement in self-care activities, and (e) levels of satisfaction with work-life experiences. Each section contained both quantitative and qualitative items. Quantitative items included multiple selection (challenges/benefits), a frequency scale (self-care), and a 6-point Likert-style scale (satisfaction). Some of these sections were adapted from other existing instruments such as the Student COVID-19 Transition Needs Survey (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, 2020) and the IUPUI Wellness Wheel (Toler & Briscoe, 2018).

The Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (2020) Student COVID-19 Transition Needs Survey asked students about major disruptions and challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were given multiple selection options for potential challenges as well as an open-ended response item. The challenges and benefits sections of the survey instrument designed for this research was made similarly but tailored to challenges and benefits we thought would occur more frequently of staff. The self-care activity options were developed around the IUPUI Wellness Wheel and the eight (8) dimensions of wellness (Toler & Briscoe, 2018). To enhance the interpretation of quantitative data, each section included opportunities for additional, open comments. There were many times advisors were asked to reflect on time periods prior to the administration of the survey. We defined those time periods as (a) prior to, or pre-, COVID meaning before mid-March 2020, (b) during the 100% remote work time period for all advisors meaning mid-March through July 2020, and (c) after the 100% remote work time period ended for many advisors, or August and beyond.

Data Collection and Analysis

The committee used a convenience sample and administered this survey via the IUPUI advising listserv from September 24, 2020 through October 30, 2020. The data were analyzed in multiple phases: (a) quantitative data were analyzed using ANOVA for comparison of self-care habits in three time periods and independent t-tests were used for Likert scale questions and comparing to the varying demographic information, (b) qualitative data were analyzed by each committee member and then coded for themes, (c) mixed methods were used to combine quantitative data with supporting qualitative data, and (d) a second JACADA committee (Campus Affairs) reviewed the data for additional observations and questions for administrators to consider. For context, the JACADA Campus Affairs committee was included because

those members will use the report to inform the general advising membership and discuss programming around the common themes that were found and/or still need addressed.

Participants

In total, 77 advisors completed the survey representing a 50-60% response rate given the estimated total number of professional and faculty advisors across IUPUI's campus. Of those respondents, 82% identified as female, almost half were Millennial or Gen Z (birth years of 1981-2012), and over 84% identified as white. Most respondents (84%) stated they worked zero days/week remotely pre-COVID. One-third (33%) reported 81-100% of their job duties were directly related to advising, closely followed by 23.4% with 62-80% of their responsibilities related to advising and 20.8% with 41-60% of their work related to advising. Just over half stated their average advising caseload was 151-300 students with another 30% advising smaller caseloads. Advising caseloads primarily consisted of undergraduates, freshman through senior, but a quarter of respondents advised at least some graduate-level students. Almost 55% worked as a professional/advisor for more than 5 years, and 40% teach alongside their advising duties.

Results

The Results section summarizes the main points of the research questions: challenges, benefits, frequency of engagement in self-care activities, and desired work arrangements. Tables are provided for viewing some of the raw quantitative data. Qualitative data are included in some sections to provide a rich connection of advisor comments to their expressed activities.

Challenges

Remote work challenges due to COVID-19 included items related to work environment, health, caretaking, and basic needs. When asked about challenges associated with their home work environment during the 100% remote work period (mid-March through July 2020), approximately 70% of respondents reported feeling disconnected from colleagues; followed by distractions at home (51%), feeling disconnected from students/advisees (50%) and needing to purchase additional equipment to complete job functions (47%). Only 65% of advisors used a university-issued computer/device while working remotely. When asked about challenges related to health, caretaking, and basic needs during the 100% remote work period: 33% of advisors noted they had dependents at home due to school/daycare closures, 22% experienced financial challenges, and over 20% cited the lack of a personal support system and other mental health issues, respectively. Over three-quarters of respondents indicated an increase in stress/anxiety between March and July.

Benefits and Self-Care Activities

Overall, advisors engaged in more self-care activities such as eating healthier, taking short breaks, and exercising during the work from home period of mid-March through July 2020 as compared to both before and after. That is, in general, advisors reported peaking in self-care activities during the 100% remote work period. Of the 13 activities measured, 10 of those healthy habits saw an increase between the "Prior" and "During" periods while the three areas of professional development, socializing/connecting with family and/or friends, and attending a place of worship decreased. More detailed data are presented in Table 1.

In examining the quantities of self-care activities engaged in, there were two populations of advisors where these activities did not peak during the 100% remote work period. Advisors of color reported continued increases in self-care activities both during and after the remote work period. Additionally, advisors of color reported the single greatest increase (average of 6.08 activities per week

Table 1

Means for Rates of Engagement in Individual Self-Care Activities from the time periods (1) Prior to mid-March (labeled Prior), (2) mid-March to July (labeled During), and (3) August and beyond (labeled After).

	Rate **Prior** to Remote Work	Rate **During** Remote Work	Rate **After** Remote Work
Physical activity/Exercise	3.35	3.52	3.47
Meditation	1.14	1.39	1.27
Therapy	0.32	0.43	0.35
Artistic expression (e.g. journaling, music, creating art)	1.29	1.94	1.81
Healthy eating habits/hydration	3.94	4.04	3.88
Adequate sleep (at least 6-8 hours of sleep/night)	3.91	4.17	3.94
Taking short breaks during work hours	3.39	4.22	3.86
Brain stimulating activities (e.g. puzzle, chess)/ Reading	2.52	3.23	2.90
Professional development	1.51	1.49	1.39
Socializing/connecting with family and/or friends	3.30	2.66	2.74
Attending a place of worship	1.16	0.32	0.42
Spending time outdoors	3.12	4.09	3.68
Practical activities (e.g. setting out clothes, meal prep…)	3.66	3.82	3.62
Other	0.09	0.10	0.01

Note. To analyze how advisors changed the rates in which they engaged in self-care activities, their answers to the self-care items in all three time periods (prior, during, and after remote work) were recoded as follows: Blank and N/A choices = 0, Once a month = 1, 2-3 times a month = 2, Once a week = 3, 2-3 times a week = 4, Daily = 5

prior to remote work and 8.67 after the 100% remote work period) in total self-care activities engaged in weekly (Table 2). The second population to not report a peak in self-care during the remote work period was the 43% of participants with one or more minor dependents living at home during the remote working period, who averaged just over seven self-care activities per week, a decrease from pre-COVID results (Table 2).

While we have included the data for "After" the return from remote work, it was not strongly analyzed and will be discussed in the limitations section. Instead, the use of qualitative data supported the advisor change from the first time period to the second. Two examples of connections made in the qualitative data were the advisor comments:

- "I gained ten hours a week when we began working remotely… I have used that time for improving my diet and [exercising] more than I have in years."
- "Not [having] a commute has significantly improved my energy levels and mood. I now spend that time going for a walk."

Table 2
Total Number of Self-Care Activities (out of 13, excluding "Other") Engaged in at Least Weekly by Demographic (Suppressing or aggregating groups with fewer than 5 respondents)

	Total **Prior** to Remote Work	Total **During** Remote Work	Total **After** Remote Work
Female (63)	6.97	7.73	7.41
Male (11)	7.09	7.27	7.27
Millennial or Gen Z – born 1981 or later (38)	6.76	7.84	7.47
Gen X or Baby Boomer – born prior to 1981 (39)	7.38	7.46	7.36
White (65)	7.26	7.55	7.18
Person of Color (12)	6.08	8.17	8.67
Strongly extraverted (11)	7.73	6.55	6.73
Slightly more extraverted (11)	6.55	8.82	8.00
Ambivert (13)	6.85	7.85	8.08
Slightly more introverted (26)	7.45	7.42	7.65
Strongly introverted (16)	6.56	7.81	6.56
Has Minor Dependents Living at Home (33)	7.39	7.15	7.39
Does not Have Minor Dependents at Home (44)	6.84	8.02	7.43
TOTAL (77)	7.08	7.65	7.42

Note. To analyze how advisors changed the quantity of self-care activities they engaged in at least weekly, their answers to the self-care items in all three time periods (prior, during, and after remote work) were recoded as follows: Blank and N/A choices = 0, Once a month = 0, 2-3 times a month = 0, Once a week = 1, 2-3 times a week = 1, Daily = 1. Three calculated variables were then created to represent the sum of all activities engaged in at least weekly during each time period.

Desired Work Arrangements

In the future, advising leaders and campus administration will need to determine the protocol for advisors to return to campus safely in a more full-time capacity. Post-pandemic operations are likely to be different, and most survey respondents (66%) are hopeful for a hybrid work schedule in their new normal. In open-ended comments, these respondents identified their ideal work schedule to include working remotely 2-3 days a week. Advisors placed a high value on the option of continued flexible schedules and remote work to maintain increased work-life balance and productivity (17 comments), improved job satisfaction (29 comments) and mental health (20 comments), and flexible student meeting options (17 comments). It was made clear by qualitative data that an advisor's personal life greatly intertwines with their professional role. The experiences they had and ways they were able to serve students during the 100% remote work period had perceived benefits to their students. For example, one advisor stated, "With an ideal schedule, I would be retained for the long term. If I can continue to adjust my schedule around my family's schedule, the flexibility would be the key to a happy, healthy, productive employee." The option to continue flexible work schedules was of value to advisors personally and professionally.

Because the IUPUI campus is decentralized, it may be the decision of individual units to implement and approve remote work options. This may pose challenges for some advisors, specifically

those whose birth year puts them in the "Millennial" and "Gen Z" generations (as compared to those in Gen X and Baby Boomers) and those who identified as female. These groups reported significantly *lower* levels of comfort with approaching their supervisor to request remote work options and to modify their work schedule to continue healthy habits developed during COVID-19 remote work. Conversely, advisors who are caring for minor dependents at home felt more comfort in seeking accommodations to their schedule.

Additional Highlights

Other highlights that were presented to campus leadership included:

- **"Advising is teaching" is not just a slogan.** 40% of advisors indicated a teaching component to their job duties. It is reasonable to extrapolate that, in addition to learning to advise remotely, advisors were also learning to teach effectively online during the March-August time period.
- **Technology to support remote work was inconsistent across advisors.** 84% had reliable high-speed internet, but only 65% of advisors were using an IU-issued computer/device. It is also notable that only one-third of advisors had dual monitors to use during the remote work period.
- **Regarding what they need to feel more supported when working remotely, advisors desired:** having office-equivalent technology (computer, dual monitors, improved internet) (29 comments); basing supervision on trust and support (10 comments); and communicating more regularly with colleagues (10 comments). 18 felt supported already.
- **To feel better supported when working *on campus*, advisors desired:** Addressing health/safety concerns (12 comments); and flexing work schedule (7 comments). 11 felt supported already.

Limitations and Future Research

Advisors at IUPUI, for the most part, are still operating in the mindset and habits of the "During" remote work time period. As such, it may be of interest to reassess these measures when work-life truly returns to a semblance of pre-COVID. If further research is to be conducted, there are several limitations worth noting:

- **"After" period was not truly indicative of a return to campus.** At the time of survey construction and administration, campus directives suggested a return to in-person work. This looked very different for each unit and varied from zero days in-office per week, to 1-2 days in office, to spending one week on campus and two weeks working remotely. The "After" data should be analyzed with caution knowing many advisor circumstances may not have changed while others may have been more impacted.
- **Rate of engagement on self-care activities should be rescaled to include a true zero.** A N/A option was included but a true zero was not considered until after responses were received. An option of N/A could imply respondents were incapable of doing that activity, thus it did not apply to them. A true zero option would better distinguish between respondents who chose not to engage in activities from advisors who felt the activity simply was not applicable to their experience.
- **Likert scale question measuring "Level of Satisfaction" should indicate positive or negative.** The wording of this option simply asked if the level had changed but did not indicate for the better or worse. A separate qualitative response item allowed advisors to describe how their work-life satisfaction changed. Although one can make inferences, it does not provide a definitive statistic for use in the report.

- **Results may not be generalizable due to sampling.** A convenience sample was used for a group of advisors at one institution identified as a large, urban, research, public, and 4-year institution. One must note the campus is decentralized and units have the ability to make varying decisions when it comes to staffing. The results at IUPUI may not be generalizable to other campuses but could benefit those looking to survey their own staff members.

Conclusion

The results of this survey suggest the importance of self-care and more flexible advising services which benefit advisors. As such, it is important for there to be an ongoing conversation amongst advisors, advising supervisors, and campus leadership about continuing remote work options in the future. Many advisors noted improvements to mental health related to more flexible schedules, which could retain advisors in their positions and allow them to continue meaningful relationships with their students. It will be crucial for supervisors and advisors to have conversations around self-care and flexible advising opportunities proactively, to meet the needs of both students and staff in an evolving higher education landscape.

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